

Feature Story

United States Department of Agriculture • Natural Resources Conservation Service • 100 W. Capitol St.
Ste 1321, Jackson, MS 39269 • Phone: (601) 965-5205 • Web: www.ms.nrcs.usda.gov

Indianola Farm Provides Haven for Pollinators

By Justin Fritscher
NRCS Mississippi Public Affairs
justin.fritscher@ms.usda.gov

Indianola, Miss. — Along the lush banks of the Sunflower River, Steve Martens has a piece of paradise. The Madison, Miss. resident owns 1,600 acres of farmland and forests, fertile for soybeans, corn, cotton and also for white-tail deer and bobwhite quail.

But Martens is also buzzing about the success of another type of critter – pollinators. A wealth of butterflies and bees have benefited from the best management practices Martens has installed on his Sunflower County farm with the help of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

“My 6-year-old daughter loves it,” he said. “We ride through the native grasses, and the butterflies are everywhere. She loves to chase them.”

When Martens began enrolling in NRCS programs in 2002, he was using the programs as a way to manage the land split between forestlands and fields. The avid sportsman wanted to create great habitat. And while the deer have grown stronger and bigger, he has seen subtle changes around his place. It’s a healthier place.

While his focus was on deer, he said he has learned the importance of planting native grasses, especially for the pollinators. Pollinators are important. They’re responsible for the reproduction of 70 percent of flowering plants, accounting for two-thirds of crop plants. As pollinators gather nectar and pollen for their survival, they also provide an ecological service that is worth \$14.6 billion annually in the United States, quite a chunk of change for this diverse batch of insects, birds and mammals.

Unfortunately, many of the world’s pollinators are at risk. Studies have shown that about a third of the nation’s managed honeybee colonies are lost each year, a trend that has held steady for the past five years. Pesticides and other toxins have also negatively impacted butterflies and other crucial pollinators.

Martens has used a patchwork of NRCS programs to improve his land, and many of those programs include practices that have huge benefits for pollinators, evident in his fields of butterflies and bees each spring.

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He said he is happy to do it. Conservation came naturally to him. “My dad, Bill Martens, and grandfather, Steve Reed, instilled in me the values of conservation,” he said. “I’m an outdoors person, and I am willing to try any program as long as I can make it economically feasible. My goal is not to make money. Rather, I just want a great place to enjoy.”

Martens has used the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP). He also uses prescribed burning to spark fresh new growth. “After a burn, many more legumes and insects appear,” he said. “The idea is to make the whole habitat good,” he said. “Just the beauty of seeing them is worth it.”

That beauty extends beyond just the wide array of insects. Martens said he enjoys his vistas of wild sunflowers. “It was golden as far as you can look,” he said. “This time of the year, that’s what you pay attention to.”

Martens said he could not have created such an environmentally-friendly, conservation hot spot without his local NRCS officers, including Soil Conservationist Trinity Long.

“We are happy to see the benefit our programs and practices have on all wildlife, especially on pollinators,” Long said. “The NRCS prides itself in supporting sustainable agriculture and land management, and Steve’s farm is meeting those goals.”

NRCS and Pollinators:

USDA and the Natural Resources Conservation Service recognize the importance of pollinators. USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack designated June 20-26 as National Pollinator Week as a way to honor pollinators, “which provide significant environmental benefits necessary for maintaining healthy, biodiverse ecosystems,” Secretary Vilsack wrote in his proclamation.

The NRCS promotes pollinator habitat in its cost-share programs, which incentivizes the establishment of nectar corridors. To learn more about NRCS programs, visit your local USDA service center or [this website](#).

Pollinators on the Web

For information on NRCS programs, visit www.ms.nrcs.usda.gov.

For information on pollinators, visit www.nrcs.usda.gov/pollinators.

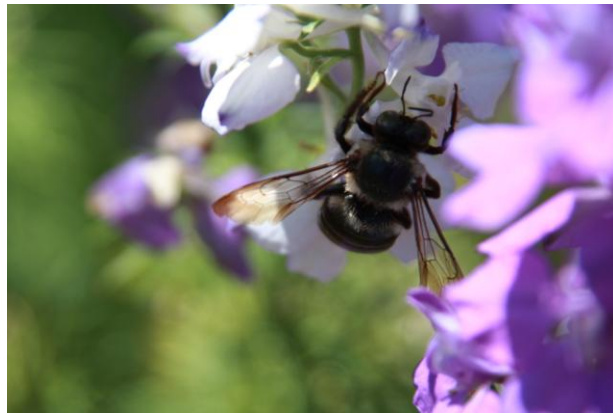
For a copy of NRCS’ “Be Kind to Pollinators” brochure, call 1-888-526-3227.

For information on National Pollinator Week, visit www.pollinator.org.

Some other helpful sites are www.xerxes.org/pollinator-conservation/ and www.abfnet.org.

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(Top Left): Steve Martens uses practices on his Sunflower County land that provides big benefits for pollinators. Martens is pictured at the NRCS's pollinator garden in Madison's Strawberry Park.

(Top Right) A bee gathers nectar from a flower in a garden maintained by the Mississippi State Extension Service office in Brandon.

(Bottom) A butterfly gathers nectar from a mimosa flower in Adams County.

Photos by Justin Fritscher, NRCS Mississippi

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